

Close race in Austrian presidential election

Markus Salzmann**23 May 2016**

The two candidates in the Austrian presidential election, the Greens' Alexander Van der Bellen and the candidate of the extreme right-wing Freedom Party (FPÖ), Norbert Hofer, are running neck-and-neck after Sunday's vote.

Although Hofer had a clear lead after the counting of all votes cast with 51.9 percent, over 800,000 postal votes will only be counted Monday. Projections based on these votes place both candidates in a tie. They are separated by only 3,000 votes out of a total of 4.4 million cast ballots.

In the first round last month, which included several candidates, Hofer won decisively with 36 percent of the vote. Van der Bellen barely managed 20 percent. Just days ago, he was 13 percent behind Hofer in the polls.

That both candidates are now in a tie is largely thanks to a higher turnout at the polls and the mobilisation of sections of the urban middle class. A month ago, 68.5 percent of the 6.38 million electorate took part in the vote; this time around it was 71.8 percent.

Van der Bellen won most of the large cities, while Hofer led in rural areas. In Vienna, where one sixth of all voters live, around 60 percent voted for the Green candidate, although it is expected that after the counting of postal ballots, his majority will be even higher. Apart from the working-class districts of Floridsdorf and Semmering, he obtained majorities in every area. Van der Bellen also won in every state capital, apart from the Burgenland capital, Eisenstadt.

According to election polls, which were however sharply divided, Van der Bellen won among those under 30 (56 percent), women (54 percent) and voters with a high school qualification (69 percent), while Hofer was clearly ahead among workers (71 percent). Among public sector employees, the two men tied.

Whether Norbert Hofer will be the first right-wing extremist to take the position of Austrian president will only become clear over the course of Monday—unless

the election is challenged. But that it has reached this stage is the responsibility of the established parties, which are utterly discredited and have prepared the ground for the rise of the far right.

The candidates of the social democratic SPÖ and conservative ÖVP, the parties that form the government in Vienna, trailed far behind in the first round with 11 and 10 percent respectively. For the first time since the Second World War, neither of the two parties will provide the head of state.

The miserable result for the SPÖ in the first round triggered the resignation of Chancellor Werner Faymann, who has since been replaced by former rail manager Christian Kern. Under his leadership, the SPÖ will persist with a strict austerity programme, while at the same time drawing closer to the FPÖ.

Van der Bellen's ability to close the gap with Hofer in recent days has less to do with his politics than with the broad opposition to Hofer and the FPÖ. On election evening, public broadcaster ORF reported on several voters who put their cross beside Van der Bellen to block Hofer. Forty percent of his voters said they had gone to the polls to cast their ballots against the right, stated pollster Peter Hajek. "All other motives clearly fell into the background," he said.

Under its leader Heinz-Christian Strache, the FPÖ has adopted a firmly xenophobic position. Strache recently demanded the upper limit for refugees to be "zero." Hofer's entire election campaign was directed against foreigners and refugees. At the same time, the FPÖ stands for budgetary discipline and an anti-EU policy.

Although the head of state's powers are largely ceremonial, he is according to the constitution head of the armed forces and can dissolve parliament under certain situations. Hofer warned during the campaign that he would make extensive use of these powers. If he were to dissolve parliament in the event of a victory, the FPÖ would likely emerge from elections as the

largest party.

There were hardly any differences between Van der Bellen and Hofer in terms of the content of their campaigns. Both appeared together on television after the vote, treating each other with extreme politeness. The only fundamental difference was their stance towards the European Union. While Hofer rejects the EU, the Green candidate defended it in full, including the austerity measures in Greece and the sealing off of its external borders to refugees.

In January, Van der Bellen told the *Presse* he would “invite the best jurists to the presidential palace” to legally enforce an upper limit for refugees. Within the Green Party, he served as a right-winger for years and pushed the party to adopt a hard right course.

This was why several representatives of the ÖVP and SPÖ united behind Van der Bellen. In the so-called committee of persons for the Green candidate, individuals who campaign for the candidate if their names are called, there were—in addition to prominent business figures—leading representatives of both the ÖVP and SPÖ, which have taken turns in governing the country or ruled jointly in coalitions for decades.

At the same time, numerous pseudo-left groups swung behind Van der Bellen.



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